

***FISH & WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET*****Meeting Date:** November 12, 2015**Agenda Item:** 2015 Elk Late Shoulder Season Pilot Project**Division:** Wildlife**Action Needed:** Final**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 40 Minutes**Background**

FWP's direction is to manage elk populations to objective. As a management tool FWP proposes a limited-scope, antlerless elk only pilot shoulder season to begin after the 2015 general season in 6 hunting districts that are over population objective. HDs proposed here include the east portion of 391, and HDs 445, 446, 449 and 452 (east side of the Big Belts and the Castle Mountains); and 410 (Missouri River Breaks). Except in HD 410, the season would run from Nov. 30 to Feb. 15, 2016; licenses would not be valid on National Forest lands or FWP WMAs; and any B-licenses would be good in the hunting district for which they are valid and subject to the same restrictions. The shoulder season in HD 410 would not start until Jan. 1 to allow elk to redistribute and would run until Feb. 15. Elk hunting there is by drawing only and either-sex permits, valid for ANTLERLESS ELK ONLY, or B-licenses specific to the district would be valid except they would not be valid on the CMR Refuge. A map of the proposed seasons, a master list of the HDs and their individual justifications can be found in the commission packet.

This proposal differs from that adopted by the commission in October in that it drops HD 392 because of landowner concerns and includes the eastern part of HD 391 in Meagher County. It is important to include this part of HD 391 because elk typically move back and forth between it and adjacent HDs 446, and 452. Not including it would negatively affect overall harvest in the adjacent HDs if elk move from those into HD 391 because of hunting, thus creating a refuge scenario in HD 391. This would exacerbate landowner conflicts and game damage issues as well as hinder the ability to effectively evaluate the shoulder seasons in adjacent districts.

**Public Involvement Process & Results**

During the October meeting it was said that the Devil's Kitchen Working Group is in full support of the pilot proposal for HD 445. Likewise, those in HDs 446, 449 and 452 have been endorsed by a "vast majority" of landowners and the Meagher County Commission supports the concept. In Region 3 the proposal has been vetted with a limited number of landowners and sportsmen with support among landowners being mixed and that of the Broadwater Rod & Gun Club being either positive or at least not opposed. Public comment was accepted from until Friday, Nov. 6<sup>th</sup> and we received 299 comments, all via surveymonkey. Most, by a substantial margin, agreed with the proposal. The most common theme, whether the commenter agreed or disagreed with the proposal, was that access was the issue and in many places elk could not be harvested without access to private land. There was also a considerable amount of confusion as to what was actually proposed. Many spoke to shoulder seasons in general and not specifically to this pilot project and many were still confusing shoulder seasons with game damage hunts. Several comments disliked allowing rifle hunting during archery season. But because of the inclusion HD 391 in this proposal, comment will be taken through today's meeting.

**Alternatives and Analysis**

If this proposal is not adopted, there would be no pilot shoulder seasons starting December 2015. Shoulder seasons could still be proposed and adopted during biennial season-setting for the 2016-2017 hunting seasons. No pilot this winter would preclude experiences that might inform the season-setting process. Management seasons and other existing tools would remain available in these hunting districts.

**Agency Recommendation & Rationale**

FWP recommends the commission adopt for public comment a 2015-16 late-season shoulder season pilot project for one or more of the 6 hunting districts identified by FWP.

**Proposed Motion** I move that the commission adopt a 2015-16 late-season shoulder season pilot project including the following hunting district(s): (one or more hunting districts identified by commission).